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NESSIE and other Lake Monsters

NAHUELITO, PATAGONIAN LAKE MONSTER

by Mark Chorvinsky

Many tourists around the popular Argentinian resort of Bariloche have sighted a lake monster that has been dubbed "Nahuelito." In the manner of Nessie, Nahuelito is named after the body of water that is her domain, Nahuel Huapi Lake, which covers 318 sq. miles at the foot of the Patagonian mountains.

Nahuelito has occasionally been visible for several minutes on the surface of the lake and has been sighted by scores of tourists and locals. Descriptions have varied from that of a giant water snake with humps and fish-like fins to a swan with a snake's head, the overturned hull of a boat, and the stump of a tree. Estimates of the creature's length range from 15 to 150 feet. Nahuelito is said to surface only in the summer, when the wind is still. Witnesses say that a sudden swell of water and a shooting spray precede the surfacing of the creature.

There are many resorts in the mountains of southern Argentina. Bariloche resort hosts 100,000 tourists in summer season and as many in winter. The largest group of Nahuelito sightings was at the beginning of March, coinciding with the tourist season. The population of the resort areas have taken to Nahuelito in expected ways. The possibilities for exploitation have not escaped the local's notice: Nahuelito T-shirts and posters are common sights around the resorts.

Nahuelito has become an Argentinian media star, as the summer vacation in Patagonia coincides with the slow news "silly season." The first films of the creature, showing little more than lines and ripples on the water, have been shown many times on news shows. They are said to provide little information as to Naheulito'a appearance. Patagonia, with its mountainous and desolate regions, has been home to many tales of monstrous animals, and the notion of a Patagonian lake monster is not a new one. Patagonian

Indians told of a huge creature lake-dwelling creature without head, legs or tail. The Patagonian plesiosaur has been in the public consciousness since the early 1920s.

Peter Costello, in his book *In Search of Lake Monsters* (Granada Publishing Limited, St. Albans, Herts, 1975) points out that eleven years before Nessie came to the world's attention, the search for a Patagonian plesiosaur made international news. In 1922 Dr. Clementi Onelli (Director of the Buenos Aires Zoo) received a report of huge tracks and crushed bushes and undergrowth leading to an unnamed lake shore. And, according to the account, in the middle of the lake was a monster.

The well-regarded informant, an American gold prospector named Martin Sheffield, saw "an animal with a huge neck like a swan, and the movements made me suppose the beast to have a body like that of a crocodile." The swan-like neck mentioned here is an element of a number of contemporary Naheulito sightings as well. In Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Lost World*, which was serialized in *The Strand* in 1912, one of the characters describes a lake monster he once sighted, as a "creature like a huge swan, with clumsy body and a high flexible neck." The inevitable circular question of whether life is imitating art or art imitating life (or some permutation thereof) comes to the forefront in cases such as this. Costello felt that *The Lost World* "inevitably colored popular ideas" and set the stage for the 1922 Patagonian plesiosaur debut.

Onelli had been receiving sporadic reports of an unknown creature since 1897 and with the information he now had as a result of the Sheffield sighting, he was determined to mount an expedition to find the monster. The expedition, which was led by Jos Cihagi, superintendent of the zoo, was unsuccessful, causing Leonard Matters in the July 1922 issue of *Scientific American* to conclude that the plesiosaur, "if it ever existed, appears to have fled to parts unknown."

One interesting aspect of the ill-fated expedition was the conservationist attitude some Argentinians had toward the monster, foreshadowing the efforts of Joseph W. Zarzynski and Jacques Boisvert with Champ and Memphre respectively, both of which are now protected by law. In 1922, Dr. Albarrin, President of the Society for the Protection of Animals, petitioned the Minister of the Interior to refuse permits to the expedition on the grounds that the creature in question came under laws forbidding the hunting of rare animals. The expedition was carrying dynamite (to mine the lake) and elephant rifles.

While the expedition permits were not refused, there was some question as to whether permits had been granted or not. There were crossed signals--the expedition, now far into the Patagonian lake region, stopped until the permit question was settled and this confusion and the press criticism surrounding it seriously damaged the image of the expedition.

Nahuelito sightings pre-dated both *The Lost World* and the 1922 Patagonian plesiosaur search. The George Garrett lake monster sighting is perhaps the best known historical Nahuelito sighting, the earlier sightings taking place in other lakes and rivers of Patagonia. Around 1910 Garrett was managing a company on Lake Nahuel Huapi when the brief incident supposedly occurred.

Garrett provided the following description to the *Toronto Globe* at the height of the 1922 Patagonian plesiosaur controversy: "...we were beating windward up an inlet called 'Pass Coytrue,' which bounded the peninsula. This inlet was about five miles in length, a mile or so in width, and of an unfathomable depth. Just as we were near the rocky shore of the peninsula, before tacking, I happened to look astern towards the centre of the inlet, and, to my great surprise, I saw about a quarter of a mile to leeward, an object which appeared to be 15 or 20 feet in diameter, and perhaps six feet above the water. "After a few minutes, the monster disappeared. "On mentioning my experience to my neighbours, Garrett continued, "they said the Indians often spoke of immense water animals they had seen from time to time." The news story recounting the Garrett sighting ran in the *Globe* on April 6, 1922. Thus, the story was told in retrospect, some 12 years after the event.

The plesiosaur theory is the main one being bandied about in the press and it is such a creature whose smiling countenance gazes out from the tourist posters. While the living dinosaur explanation is the most prevalent one, there are several other less popular theories making their rounds in Argentina. Of interest to those who have been following the "mystery submarine" phenomenon is the local belief that an unknown sub is prowling the lake's depths. For those readers unfamiliar with this phenomenon and its folkloric implications with regards to aquatic monsters, one of the essential notions expressed by its proponents is that the mystery submarine is a modern manifestation of the aquatic monster, a cultural variant on the water monster. (See Michel Meurger with Claude Gagnon, *Lake Monster Traditions*, Fortean Tomes, London, 1989; also *Fortean Times* #49).

Patagonia is no stranger to mystery subs--in February, 1960, the Argentine navy chased an "unidentified undersea object" for 18 days, never finding the strange intruder. The now-chic monster-mystery sub connection was not lost on the press at the time. *Newsweek* opened its February 22, 1960 feature on the mystery sub entitled "The Wily Whatzit?" thusly: "Was it a whale? Or an amphibious flying saucer? Or the Loch Ness monster gone astray?"

An article by William R. Rudy in the *New York Post* of February 17, 1960 was headlined "The Monster Rally Down Argentine Way," and describes the route that Nessie would have taken to get to Patagonia: "From Loch Ness in Northern Scotland the route lies down the Ness River, seven miles NNE into Moray Firth and the North Sea. Wind and weather conditions probably would dictate a serpent's next move--over the Orkney's into the North Atlantic, or the shorter route through treacherous Pentland Firth. Once in the North Atlantic it is virtually a straight run some 8,000 miles SSW to the cold waters of Golfo Nuevo on the lower Argentine coast." The article's illustration visually expresses the theme as it depicts a caricatured "sea serpent" monster on the surface of the water in proximity to a battleship dropping depth charges.

Also making the rounds is a third theory augmenting the growing body of strange lore surrounding nuclear power. Some Argentinians are wondering if Nahuelito could be the result of nuclear experimentation by German scientists during the Peron regime in the 1950s.

Those intrigued with almost any aspect of lake monster study will find something of

interest in the case of Nahuelito. The Lake Nahuel Huapi monster and her Patagonian relations may have been the first possibly-real creatures linked in the public consciousness with the plesiosaur, an image that is as popular or more popular today in the public imagination than it was in 1922.

Whether fact, fiction, or some surreal combination of the two, one thing is certain--Nahuelito is here to stay and we will be hearing much more about her in the future.

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